

Why Nigerian Languages Are Dying - Dr. Adeniyi [interview]

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Sep 09, 2013 (Vanguard/All Africa Global Media via COMTEX) -- NIGERIA is trapped in the local language dilemma, accustomed to speaking English, the language of British Colonialism as the Imperial power tended to wield together, people of diverse ethnic languages, cultures, traditions and religions. English was regarded and seen as the language of unity and administrative convenience in the amalgamation of northern and southern protectorates in 1914 to form such a big country in Africa with the largest population in the continent.

It was just impossible to choose a local language among about 400 with Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba as the main ones, none yielding to the other out of these three as the lingua franca even up to Independence in 1960.

In this interview, Dr. (Mrs) Kikelomo Adeniyi who holds Ph.D in English, Chief Lecturer in the Department of English, AOCOED and Deputy Director, Passages, Linkages and Collaboration of the institution bares her mind on what it takes to entrench the use of mother tongue or the local language.

To what will you attribute this national predicament of Nigerians finding it difficult to speak their indigenous local languages and English the preferred language?

My overview is that Nigeria is a multi lingual country with more than 400 languages each standing on its own, apart from several other dialects that cannot be counted. For example, Yoruba language has many dialects. These include Ekiti, Egba, Ijebu, Ondo, Ijesha, Egun (Badagry), Oyo dialects. So also with Hausa, Igbo, etc, having different dialects.

With the arrival of British colonial masters, there was the need for a language to unify us (Nigerians) at least for the purpose of communication, hence the introduction and use of the English Language. But it did not stop at that. Something had to be attached to it, in order to motivate speaking of English. The English Language became compulsory in public examinations and to get jobs and appointments. For instance, interpreters, who translate from local language to English in those days, were highly regarded and valued. They were rich at that time and so our people were gradually interested in English while our native languages or mother tongues were ignored.

However, in our respective homes, we were compelled to speak our mother tongues.

But as a country, for peace to reign, there is need for a central language. Yoruba, Hausa or Igbo won't be accepted as a common language which can be spoken by all. English was seen as neutral. No one will oppose it because it does not belong to any of us. It was the language of unity.

How did English Language become our lingua franca?

In our constitution, English had been recognised and allowed. For instance, in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, it was stipulated that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore. But nobody is using these native languages apart from English, which is still thriving. At the level of the State Houses of Assembly, only in Lagos to be specific, that a resolution was passed for the proceedings to be conducted in the mother tongue (Yoruba). Legislators were asked to use the mother tongue, but it is not done. In fact, it has not been possible.

I know that in London, England, children of Indian parents know how to speak the Indian language. This is because when they finish learning in school with English, on their return home after school, parents speak Indian language to their children.

In the National Policy on Education, it was stated that our children should be taught at primary and Nursery level in the mother tongue, or in other words, teach them in the language of the immediate environment.

But this is not so. After paying so much in primary and nursery schools for their children, no parents want them to be taught in the mother tongue, except in English.

Why do parents resist teaching their kids in the local language?

Let's take Lagos for instance. Lagos is a Cosmopolitan City, so English is used generally. There is no central local language. The lingua franca is English. The next to it is Pidgin English. But inspite of this, the English spoken today by these children or even youths is rubbish. They cannot speak good English and also cannot speak their mother tongue. They cannot write good English. To compound the situation, everybody loves English. You need to pass English Language in WASSSCE or WAEC among other things to enter the

They don't hate Nigerian language. It is because there is no law to compel them do so. Before now, there was a stipulation by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, NERDC, that Nigerian children must offer a local language at SSSI. But it is no longer compulsory now.

People hate things Nigerian in nature. We like only foreign things, treat things like speaking the mother tongue as "Idiotic" But if our children speak English wrongly, we are angry and reprimand them.

Access to internet, GSM and social media had compounded it. Children use SMS language while writing English nowadays.

How do you find the situation today?

Nigerian languages are gradually dying. While some parents can speak the native language, the children cannot speak the mother tongue.

Even grand mothers are forced to speak English to the kids, even if the English spoken is not correct.

In those days, there was a Yoruba proverb which says: "If you speak English in your in-laws house, you must interpret it."

Inter-tribal marriages are now forcing people to speak English at home.

It is very simple for children to hear and speak the local language than adults. In some time to come, people who cannot speak the local language may not be considered for elective positions as governors or legislators. There was the case of some children who went for scholarship test in Bayelsa State and performed well. But when asked to count one to ten in their mother tongue, majority of them could not and so missed the chance of getting scholarship.

What do you think can be done to save the local language from extinction?

There should be psychic re-orientation; need for jingles on radio and TV appreciating Nigerian languages, advertisements in print media to make people love and enjoy speaking the local language. We thank God for Yoruba Nollywood and Movies. Children are compelled to watch and listen. These Yoruba and may be Ibo and Hausa movies are helpful to parents whose children are not speaking the mother tongue.

The NERDC should re-visit the school curriculum and make Nigerian languages to be compulsory, enforce the policy of learning in the language of the immediate environment. I want to recall the Ife project by late Prof Babs Fafunwa in which two groups of primary school children were set up. One group was taught all the subjects in Yoruba language; the other group was taught in English. The Yoruba group performed better than the group taught in English.

It's unfortunate that most people in the National Assembly don't care about the use of the local languages. Hausa language won't die because parents speak it at home with their children. No matter how educated the Hausa man is, he speaks his language to the children at home.

The Yoruba are trying, but not up to Hausa people who speak it at home level first. The Igbo are worse in this respect. They hardly speak Igbo at home with their children. To speak and understand other languages is better for you, it's also for survival. If you can speak the language of the immediate environment, one can buy things at cheaper price in the market than speaking English. Once you speak English in the local markets, prices are often inflated.

There is clear difference between theory and practice. I read English, but speak Yoruba. We have this concept called socio-linguistics which has to do with language and culture, language and society. Use of language in the context and situation that you find yourself. But for the children, they are forced to speak English at all contexts.

What advice do you have on this?

People should try to always speak the mother tongue at home. It would then be easier for children to speak it because it's informal, in the natural setting. Curriculum should be revisited in order to enforce mother tongue in learning while at school. When there is inter-ethnic marriage, like Ibo married to Yoruba, the couple should decide what language the children will learn and acquire it at early age.

Language acquisition takes place informally. We can expose our children to more local languages and would be better for them. They have plasticity of being easily receptive to learning a new thing including language.

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